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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/I, NEA/ELA, EEB

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SUBJECT: Rebuild Iraq 2008 Conference - Less Than Meets the Eye

REF: Wilson-Stephenson email exchanges

¶1. (SBU) Summary and comment: Project Rebuild Iraq 2008 (not to be confused with the similarly named look-alike tradeshow, IRAQ BUILD 2008, which took place in Amman in April 2008) has in previous years been a major event among those interested in development in Iraq. While seemingly professional and well-run with many exhibitors present from all over the world, this year's event devolved into little more than a trade show for technical and construction industries to show off their wares. There was an effort to make it a "conference," but little policy or development planning substance was observed. It also became a forum for critique of the Iraqi and Jordanian governments. In the sole conference session, Anbar provincial officials criticized the Iraqi central government for excessive regulations and barriers to trade, and then targeted the Jordanian government for its visa entry procedures, saying they obstructed trade flow. End summary and comment.

¶2. (U) The 5th annual Project Rebuild Iraq 2008 "conference" opening session occurred May 5-8, 2008, in Amman. The apparently well-organized event, held in three pavilion exhibition halls at the Amman Exhibition Park, advertised over 300 exhibitors from the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and the United States. Note: Post forwarded the glossy guidebook to NEA-I. End note. Formerly one event, the Project Rebuild Iraq trade show has now split, due to internal disputes within the original show's organizer, into two different events with similar names: Iraq Build and Project Rebuild Iraq. The original trade show had U.S. Department of Commerce certification in 2007, but lost it for 2008 due to various reasons (note: FCS representatives did, however, visit some of the U.S. companies that were exhibiting).

¶3. (SBU) EconOffs attended the conference's opening session on the evening of May 6th, which attracted a paltry audience of 40-50 people. The keynote topic was "The Role of the Iraqi Business Community in Jordan in the [Iraq] Reconstruction efforts." A subsequent session set for May 7th was eventually canceled. Several presenters did not arrive from Iraq in time and the Mosul delegation, despite postponements, failed to deliver its scheduled presentation.

¶4. (SBU) Sheikh Walid Al-Araak, leader of the Al-Arrak tribe and Deputy Secretary General of the Iraq Awakening Council of Anbar, and Othman Al-Rawi, Anbar's Governor for Financial Affairs, headed the Anbar delegation to the event. Sheikh Al-Araak commented that the Awakening Councils were willing to provide security and workers for new investors, stating that the Awakening Councils were now no longer militias, but rather political movements.

¶5. (SBU) During this first session Al-Rawi criticized the Government of Jordan's entry policy, particularly the new visa procedures that went into effect on May 1, calling them "inconvenient" to businesses in Anbar and responsible for the halt in the flow of goods and services. He commented on the investment potential in hydrocarbons, stating that local experts believed that Anbar's Akkaz gas field had "massive" reserves. Al-Rawi complained that the Government of Iraq (GOI) was not responsive to initiatives to explore oil and gas reserves in Anbar, and if approved, the draft Hydrocarbon Law would work against such initiatives. He further reported that centralization of the GOI's bureaucracy also posed an obstacle to investment, stating that he had to meet with Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih each month in order to obtain approvals for his business activities.

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